

## Castoff from London, Pearls in Kantamanto? A Critique of Second-hand Clothing

Lydia Ayorkor Manieson<sup>(a)</sup>, Tiziana Ferrero-Regis<sup>(a)</sup>,  
a) Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

**Keywords:** Second-hand Clothes Trade; Ghana; Global North; Global South; Social Justice.

**Abstract:** African countries are today the major importers of the lowest grade of second-hand (SH) clothing. As a result of the complexity and opacity of the international geographies of SH clothing trade, inequalities and imbalances between Global North (GN) and South (GS) continue to maintain a relationship of colonial dependence. With the opening of global markets and the intense circulation of fast fashion in the GN from the 1990s, the trade has exploded in the twenty-first century. This paper presents a critical look at the decades' old SH clothing exchange in Kantamanto, the biggest SH market in West Africa, situated within the central business district of Accra, Ghana. The paper scrutinises the export of unwanted donated clothing, popularly known as 'Obroni w'awu' (white man is dead), to Kantamanto. We combine direct observation and an interpretive research design through the analysis of photos taken from Kantamanto that capture and document local circular practices, exposing a duality: on the one hand, clothing's symbolic value that is lost in the GN is reconstituted in the GS through exchange and labour-creating economies. On the other, the global trade of SH clothing has become synonym with dumping, as supply exceeds demand and the GN uses this trade to dispose of unwanted clothing in landfills.

### Introduction

Global second-hand (SH) clothing trade has a long history that dates back to the conquests of the Americas. SH trade is also linked to mid 1800s clothing exchange within Europe and between mother countries and their colonies. The expansion of SH clothing trade in African markets is a relatively recent phenomenon, that goes back to the end of the Second World War, when a large surplus of clothing became available and socio-economic transformation in Africa generated a market of new consumers. From the 1980s, with the opening of global markets and the intense circulation of fast fashion in the Global North (GN), the trade has exploded in the twenty-first century. Within this context, African countries are today the major importers of SH clothing (see Fig. 1), receiving, along with Asian countries, the lowest grade of sorted clothing. Because of the complexity and secrecy of the international geographies of SH clothing trade, inequalities and imbalances between Global North (GN) and Global South (GS) continue, maintaining a relationship of colonial dependence amongst countries.

SH clothes trade is seen as a sustainable practice in the GN because it keeps clothing in circulation (reuse). However, the export of low-



**Figure 1. One example of a Global Supply Chain Network © Melick 2020**

grade SH product to the GS raises issues of environmental and social justice. From the charities of the GN, to recyclers, through a number of sorting and resorting practices, some SH clothing is redistributed within the GN, while the remaining product is exported to the GS.

This paper examines the SH clothes trade in the biggest SH market in West Africa, Kantamanto market, located in Ghana. It looks at the paradox between the reuse of clothing, a sustainable practice in the GN, and the unintended consequence of the trade in the GS.

Following principles in sustainability and circular economy (CE), clothing and textiles should remain in circulation as long as possible. Reuse of clothing is one of the preferred CE strategies within the 9R framework (van Buren, Demmers, van der Heijden, & Witlox, 2016) as it extends the useful life of clothes. However, in the case of SH textiles' export to the GS, SH clothing constitutes the "sacrificial zone of fashion" that is the use of physical locations and people that are expendable (Niessen 2020, p. 861). Following Niessen (2020) we refer to Ghana's dress and local textiles traditions as the "traditions of the Other", and to their suppression and the environmental pollution that derives from landfill as the sacrificial zone of fashion.

This paper suggests that rebalancing the quality of the GN's over-production and overflow of clothing could improve upcycling of SH within African markets' and eventually further empower a design-led economy and practice in Ghana. At the same time, the GN should recognize other fashion systems and traditional knowledge so that a local textile industry could be revitalized.

## Methodology

Brooks proposes to map empirically how commodities are "re-made through secondary processes of production" (2013: 10), so that we understand how values are created culturally (cultural production) and how they in turn inform practices. In this paper, we look at the secondary processes of production in Kantamanto and the recreation of value using an interpretive qualitative methodology. We have engaged with analysis of images, direct observation and first-hand accounts of one of the authors, born and raised in Accra, related to purchasing practices; alteration and wearing of SH clothing in the market and an interview to an alteration maker, Kwame<sup>1</sup>. Forty-one images of the day-to-day activities within the market document the creative practices of Ghanaian tailors through alterations, repairs and re-styling. These activities add value to unwanted clothing donated by the GN, known as 'Obroñi w'awu' (white man is dead). Because of COVID restrictions, a local friend of author 1 was contacted to take pictures at the market. The interview with Kwame, who self-defines as an

alteration tailor, was conducted in January 2021. The aim was to gain insights in the life and business of one of these important figures within the system of the market. Literature review and mainstream media accounts have provided contextual and theoretical underpinning to our analysis.

## Fast fashion, clothing circulation and SH clothes

The rapid growth of the SH trade can largely be attributed to the rapid production and retail of clothes in fast fashion chains. In the industry's globalised system, fast fashion retailers are able to introduce new clothes to the shop floor almost weekly at a reduced price and quality. Brands leverage on consumer demand for newness to sell a vast number of clothes (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). In the United Kingdom (UK), consumers are reported to spend up to £44 million on clothing annually as they purchased over a million tonnes of clothes in 2016 (WRAP UK, 2012, 2017). In the United States, the increased rate of clothing acquisition has translated directly into the increased rate of clothing disposal creating 11.15 million tons of textile waste in 2017 (Freeman, 2020). In Australia, the circularity movement Moving the Needle reports that Australians discard six tonnes of clothes every 10 minutes (2020).

Conveniently, consumers dispose of a good quantity of their unwanted clothes through donation to charities which gives them a 'better feeling' about their practices (Ha-Brookshire & Hodges, 2009). This means that consumers are able to continue buying new clothes with little to no guilt knowing that clothes could be donated. Paradoxically, donation is seen as a more sustainable option to landfilling. The waste hierarchy clearly promotes disposing (landfilling) as the least preferred option in dealing with waste (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). This unsustainable system of increased clothing acquisition and rapid disposal through donation is the economy that fuels the SH trade.

Donated clothes are retailed locally in charity shops scattered across the West. However, an excess of 70% of donated clothes that cannot be sold on the local SH markets are sold to for-

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed for ethical purposes.

profit recyclers/collectors who sort and prepare the clothes for export to the GS (Amanor, 2018; Hawley, 2006). Sorted clothes are graded according to their destination to different locations including Poland, Africa, India and parts of the Middle East (Brooks, 2015; Comtrade, 2016; Norris, 2012).

### **Clothing value**

The value of clothing is lost for the western user once they dispose of it. The user does not receive any monetary return for their disposal, and unpaid volunteers employed in charities sort SH clothing. Clothing is thus further devalued. The SH clothing rhetoric is concealed by a narrative of giving and helping through the use of sometimes false and misleading messaging by some organisations that create the assumption that donations are used for humanitarian relief purposes in places that need it most. According to Hansen (2004), this rhetoric hides both the economic process and the construction of cultural demand (2004: 3). In fact, once SH clothing enters the global export, a certain exchange-value is reinstalled as at this stage global companies become involved in the redistribution to make profit. Even charity groups and NGOs make money from large quantities of donated clothing. According to Norris (2015), the re-creation of value is at the core of processes in SH clothing global trade network. Importantly, local communities in the GS add value to SH clothing by reinterpreting them stylistically or through repair and upcycling, a way in which they can express creativity. However, SH trade has hindered domestic textile and garment industries. As per 2018, some East African governments agreed to ban the trade to support the domestic textile industry and “for dignity” (de Freytas-Tamura, 2017), referring to the SH trade reinforcing the concept of universality of fashion through style caused by colonialism and cultural imperialism.

### **Global SH trade and inequality**

Beyond local stories of syncretic culture whereby SH clothing is absorbed within local clothing practices, as is done in many developing countries including Ghana, there are several fundamental issues that highlight the profound inequality of the trade. Brooks (2013) points out that the backhand of SH clothing is complex and still largely unexplored. Supply chains are long and convoluted so that tracing the route of SH clothing is extremely

difficult. Many actors are involved in the trade, from people in the west discarding their clothes to charities; people involved in sorting, brokers who buy and resell unsold clothes in charity shops; international agents trading with local agents in the Global South, merchants buying from local agents, and, finally, local people who sell at markets. The overflow of this supply chain, up to 40% of the clothes in each bale (Ricketts n.d.), ends in landfill. By exporting SH clothing to the GS, the GN has at this point disengaged from the value chain.

Other negative elements are that the SH clothing trade is subject to currency and international trades fluctuations, as well as transport costs, and “local political context and trade liberalisation” (Brooks 2013 p.15). The East African countries’ ban of SH clothing imports had a remarkable repercussion from the United States, that reserved the right to eliminate preferential trading practices with these countries if the ban was not lifted. Preferential trade allows countries to trade some items while eliminating other items. In this case, the GN imported valuable natural resources from the sub-Saharan region to the GN with in return exporting clothing waste to the GS. If unwanted clothes remain in the US, they will end up in domestic landfills, with environmental consequences for the US. Subsequently, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda succumbed to the threats and withdrew from the agreement (John, 2018). This is a typical example of the subtle economic oppression and injustice in the SH trade. Also, single traders buy bales of clothing without knowing the content, thus one can end up with only shirts and underwear, which makes their business significantly hard in monetary terms. All these factors make the SH clothing market extremely volatile, making African market sellers extremely fragile and exposed to the vagaries of global finance and economy.

### **Kantamanto SH clothing market and local practices**

Built in the 1960s by European traders (Safo, 2019), Kantamanto is an ecosystem that has grown steadily to become the largest SH clothes market in Ghana doubling as the largest in West Africa, spreading over more than 8,000 square metres of land. It reports daily sales of up to \$10 million dollars and employs over 30,000 traders from all parts of the country and beyond (Oteng-Ababio, Sarfo, & Owusu-

Sekyere, 2015). The UN Commodity Trade Statistics Database (Comtrade, 2016) reports that Ghana receives the highest quantity of SH clothes from the UK, with up to 63.5 million kilograms of used clothes exported from the UK to Ghana in 2019 (Choi, 2020), all arriving first in Kantamanto. It is worth mentioning that British colonialism in Ghana continued well into the twentieth century, thus UK continuing export of SH clothing can be seen as an enduring tie between the mother country and the colonised subject.

Bales of clothing arrive daily in containers early in the morning. The first activity is to unload the bales and wait for the traders to pick up their goods. Kayayei (young women head-porters) transport bales to the shops. This activity is also shared with men, but the practice of head-carrying is typically gendered (Ahlvin, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Traders display their wares in cubicle-sized wooden stalls within the market. Due to the limited space in the market and the individual economic power of traders, other sellers line the streets with piles of their ware on the pavement and buyers have to stoop over to scavenge for clothes. This act gives SH trading its popular Ghanaian name *bend down boutique*. In local parlance, SH clothes are called *obroni w'awu* (the white man is dead), or *clothing of calamity* in Mozambique (MaraviPost, 2018). These names emphasise clothing's loss of value in the west, and the general economic and psychological impact of used clothing imported in these African countries.

Also located in the market are traders who specialise in clothing alterations. They self-define as tailors or seamstresses and are clustered in small alteration centres spread across the market. Images show that both men and women share spaces in these centres. Clothing is piled everywhere showing the abundance and overflow of garments from the GN scattered all around Kantamanto (Figure 2).

Kwame (personal communication, February 2021) is a typical tailor making alterations in



**Figure 2. An alteration worker stationed in the pile of clothes © Kakra**

Kantamanto. He learnt how to sew early in life. Kwame's experience follows a typical traineeship starting from working for another tailor, to establishing one's own business. At the time of the interview, Kwame had been working in the market for 10 years. Sewing is seen as a life skill and is weaved into the local culture. In Ghana, sewing and weaving are taught to both genders in primary school, being part of the Creative Arts curriculum (see figure 3). With the SH trade, the skill is translated into a creative way to transform garments for size and to follow trends. Most importantly, the value of this skill is realized in repairing faulty second-hand clothes bought at the market – the same faults that may have resulted in their discard in the first instance in the west.

PRIMARY 2 TERM 1  
SECTION 2 CREATING THROUGH PERFORMANCE, COMPOSITION AND THREE-DIMENSIONAL ACTIVITIES

UNIT	SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES	CONTENT	TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES	EVALUATION
UNIT 4 (CONT'D)	The pupil will be able to:			
WEAVING AND STITCHING	2.4.2 hold a needle and thread it correctly.	<u>Skills:</u> needle and thread <u>Tools/Materials:</u> thread, tape measure, needle, fabric – (check) etc.	Brainstorm and discuss the process of making an article or arrangement. Pupils identify tools and materials used in sewing e.g. needle, sewing machine, thread.	Is the pupil able to hold the fabric, needle and thread correctly?
	2.4.3 hold fabric correctly for sewing.	Holding the fabric correctly for sewing.	Demonstrate the correct way of holding fabric, needle and threading needle and taking it through a fabric. Culminate pupils to practise holding fabric and threading needle. (Encourage pupils to concentrate on their work as well as being careful.) <b>NOTE:</b> Stress on safety measures in the use of tools and materials.	
	2.4.4 measure and fringe the edges of fabric material.	<u>Measurement and fringing the edge of materials:</u> <u>Tools/Materials:</u> tape measure, fabric etc.	Assist pupils to measure 5 cm from the edge of fabric and fringe the edges. <u>Skills:</u> measuring, threading, identification etc. <u>Values:</u> concentration, patience, obedience, respect for rules and regulations etc.	Is the pupil able to measure accurately?

**Figure 3. Creative Arts curriculum © nacca.gov.gh 2007**

<sup>2</sup> The gender imbalance within Ghanaian culture and Kantamanto cannot be discussed within this paper.



Kwame (2021) explains that the alterations he makes for his customers range from fit to fashion-based changes. He and his customers see trends via social media and are up to date with the latest western fashion. For example, rips and tears can be added to jeans, while old styles such as flared legs can be altered to skinny jeans. Fundamentally, fashion is predicated on change. The global circulation and imposition of style and trends is another way to “Othering” (Niessen 2020: 64) the GS. Additional research should be directed at the way in which western fashion continues to perpetrate colonialism through culture by making style universal.



**Figure 3. Kwame in his cubicle preparing to do some alterations © Kakra**

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper has discussed the cultural and economic imbalance established through the export of low-grade SH clothing by the GN and their absorption into the GS with its related political, social and economic inequalities that continue to perpetrate a persistent structure of dependence. In the GN, the practice of SH is seen as positive within a CE framework, as it continues to maintain clothing in circulation, but it raises ethical questions for the GS. Through the analysis of SH trade in Kantamanto, Ghana, we argue that the clothing economy must strike a balance between maintaining local textile traditions, while continuing to employ thousands of people in the SH clothing trade. In Kantamanto, where clothing is turned into a valuable commodity within Ghana's system of SH circulation and repair culture. The exchange between sellers, customers and the alteration centre reveal a self-managed, creative, networked business between the many actors involved, and agency by these actors. It would be once more an act of colonialism to terminate the trade, as SH exchange and practices

provide for a livelihood. Efforts must be made in the GN toward responsible consumption and clothing's disposal. One way to build responsible and sustainable design in the industry is that brands and designers collect their own old clothes. However, currently, *undignified fashion* ends in landfill. This is a way for the GN to rid itself of unwanted clothes, turning the negative externality of waste in the GN into a positive externality that generates income through the trade in the GS.

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